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Donghak's Transformation and Experimentation of Confucian Publicity*

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Abstract

Donghak is an indigenous Korean religious philosophy established by Choe Je-u in the late Joseon dynasty. Contrary to common misconception of Donghak as aligned with Confucianism, there is a great distance between Donghak and Confucian ideas. Although Confucianism has been regarded as having the strongest social consciousness and practicality, the truth is that it was the target of criticisms concerning the issue of publicity due to its premise of "family relation" and its tacit support of social hierarchies in pre-Qin period. Responding to the conflict between Eastern and Western civilizations, as well as the demands brought about by modernization, Donghak brings up a new concept of self, which is not limited to Confucian role ethics, namely, "everyone reverently bears Hanullim (天) within one's own" (*sicheonju,* 侍天主). Donghak's concept of self-awareness, which does not discriminate on the basis of social status and sex, and regards everyone as co-existing and communicating with Hanullim, is a novel take on the Confucian discussions of publicity.

Keywords

Donghak, Confucianism, Confucian Publicity, Choe Je-u, Hanullim, self

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Introduction

The Donghak[1] discussed in this paper refers to the religious system of thought established by Choe Je-u (1820-1864). Even though Donghak is often regarded as a continuation of Confucianism,[2] there is considerable distance between the two. Not only does Donghak represent a breakthrough and evolution of Confucianism within Korea, it also innovates and reforms the Confucian theoretical framework itself. The main contribution of Donghak to Confucianism lies in the areas of self-awareness and subjectivity. Within Confucianism, the self is a role regulated by inter-personal relationships such as the family and society. Although the Confucian tradition of "Honoring Virtue"[3] places greater emphasis on self-discovery and cultivation, self-fulfillment relies on whether it is in accordance with the heavenly principles (天理) — the contents of which frequently include societal order, traditions, and norms. Thus, within the tradition, the concept self-awareness struggles to break free from the confines of social hierarchies. In response to the conflict between Eastern and Western civilizations, as well as the demands brought about by modernization, Donghak complexifies the concept of self within Korean traditional society — revealing that anyone can be his or her own master. According to Donghak, the self is not only an individual which (or whose

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1 Donghak is commonly translated into "Eastern Learning" and occasionally into "Eastern Philosophy." It is also transliterated as Tonghak (McCune-Reischauer system) and sometimes Tong-hak. In this paper, the transliterations of Korean terms are based on the Revised Romanized of Korean system (RRK), which has been officially used in South Korea since its release to the public (by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism) in 2000. Similarly, the transliteration of Chinese terms will be in accordance with the Hanyu Pinyin system, though older transliterations using the Wade-Giles system will be quoted as they appear in the original texts.

2 The relationship between Donghak and Confucian, Buddhist and Daoist thought is a contentious issue. Most scholars regard Donghak doctrine as being formulated on the basis of incorporating Western Learning with the fundamentals of the integrated traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. See Han (1996). However, there is still insufficient research into the issue of how these myriad elements are organically integrated into Donghak thought. Some scholars have argued that contrary to the rejection of Confucian thought by the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, the Donghak Peasant Revolution actually employs the guidance of the Confucian concepts of loyalty (忠) and filial piety (孝). See No (2003).

3 Confucian thought can be broadly divided into two main camps: "Honoring Virtue" (尊德性) and "Following Knowledge" (道問學). Through this distinction, we can also understand the conflict between Mencius' (孟子) and Xunzi's thought, and the tension between School of Principle (理學) and School of Mind (心學) within Neo-Confucianism.

moral practices) can be corrected by knowing or realizing the heavenly principles; it is originally the subject who bears the honorable Hanullim. In my view, the fact that Donghak's concept of self-awareness does not discriminate on the basis of social status and sex, and regards everyone as co-existing and communicating with Heaven (天),[4] is a novel take on the Confucian discussions of the question of publicity.

Confucian Thought and the Discussion of the Public and Private Distinction

Contrary to common opinion, the connection between Confucianism and publicity is not inseparably tight from the start. At the beginnings of Confucianism, the idea of publicity understood as the pursuit of a public value beyond the private or personal domain, was actually the criticism made by those thinkers opposed to Confucianism. In Confucius' time, the term *gong* (公, public) did not mean common value,[5] but instead referred to royalty and designated royal titles within the Zhou dynasty. The earliest thinker to understand "public" and "private" as opposing terms is Mozi (墨子), for whom "public" was regarded as universal morality and related to the concept of "public morality" (公義).[6] While there are also instances of

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4 The Chinese character 天 is pronounced as *tian* in Chinese (Hanyu Pinyin), whereas *cheon* in Korean (RRK). In Korean language, however, a vernacular term "haneul" or "hanul" is used as a corresponding word for 天, not necessarily reminding *cheon*, which is more often used as a component for Sino-Korean vocabularies. Therefore, "Hanullim" is a Korean way of calling the ultimate reality in vernacular expression. When it is needed, I will distinguish the Korean concept of 天 from the Chinese by marking their transliterations, *e.g. cheon* from tīan.

5 In the *Analects* (論語), the term *gong* (公) appears 56 times in 43 passages – almost always referring to titles or to names. The only exception is in *Analects* 6.14: 子游為武城宰. 子曰: 女得人焉爾乎? 曰: 有澹臺滅明者, 行不由徑. 非公事, 未嘗至於偃之室也. Here, gongshi (公事) is explained as "public affairs," seemingly opposed to "private affairs." However, the two occurrences of the term "private" (私) neither contain negative connotations, nor are explained as morally antagonistic to "public." See *Analects* 2.9: "I have examined his conduct when away from me, and found him able to illustrate my teachings" (退而省其私, 亦足以發); *Analects* 10.5: "At his private audience, he looked highly pleased" (私覿, 愉愉如也). For readers' reference, the related original texts are provided. Also, unless otherwise stated, all translations of classical Chinese texts are from the Chinese Text Project with some modifications and the names of the corresponding translator is indicated. The *Analects* is translated by James Legge.

6 See *Mozi* (墨子), chapter 8 "Honoring the Worthy" (尚賢上): " If a person is capable promote him, if incapable, lower his rank" (舉公義, 闢私怨). Translated by W. P. Mei.

the opposition between public and private within Mencius (孟子),[7] they only concern the distinction between central section (公田, lit. public farm) and eight outer sections (私田, lit. private farms) within the well-field system (井田法) of the Zhou dynasty; the term "public" was not used as a crucial term in discussions concerning morality. Mozi also simultaneously uses the concept of "selflessness" (無私)[8] to support the reasonableness of universal love (兼愛), as well as criticize the limitations of the Confucian concept of benevolence (仁). Mozi does not entirely reject the concept of benevolence. Rather, he proposes that the public implementation of benevolence is exactly universal love. His observation that the Confucian discussions concerning benevolence were empty, led him to the conclusion that Confucians were ignorant about the true meaning of benevolence.[9]

Xunzi actively accepts Mozi's term "public morality," but uses it to explain the moral character of the gentleman.[10] Additionally, while he also

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7 See *Mencius*, 3A3: "It is said in the Book of Poetry, "May the rain come down on our public field, And then upon our private fields!" It is only in the system of mutual aid that there is a public field, and from this passage we perceive that even in the Zhou dynasty this system has been recognized" (詩云 "雨我公田, 遂及我私." 惟助為有公田 ... 方里而井, 井九百畝, 其中為公田. 八家皆私百畝, 同養公田. 公事畢, 然後敢治私事, 所以別野人也). Translated by James Legge.

8 See *Mozi*, chapter 16 "Impartial Caring" (兼愛下): "like the sun and the moon, shedding glorious and resplendent light in the four quarters without any private intention" (譬之日月兼照天下之無有私也) and *Mozi*, chapter 4 "The Standard to Follow" (法儀): "Nothing better than following Heaven. Heaven is all-inclusive and impartial in its activities" (莫若法天 天之行廣而無私). His comparison of selflessness to the workings of Heaven and natural phenomena, is possibly related to the thought of Daoists such as Laozi (老子) and Zhuangzi (莊子). Both are translated by James Legge. See *Daodejing* (道德經), chapter 7: "'The sage ... Is it not because he has no personal and private ends, that therefore such ends are realized?" (聖人 ... 以其無私, 故能其私) and chapter 79 "In the Way of Heaven, there is no partiality of love" (天道無親). Also, see *Zhuangzi* (莊子), chapter 6 "Great Honorable Teacher" (大宗師): "Heaven overspreads all without any partial feeling, and so does Earth sustain all" (天無私覆, 地無私載) and chapter 7 "Fit for Emperors and Kings" (應帝王): "Allow all things to take their natural course; and admit no personal or selfish consideration" (順物自然而無容私焉).

9 See *Mozi*, chapter 47 "Honoring Righteousness" (貴義): "Now, the way the gentlemen of the world define magnanimity even Yu and Tang cannot alter. But when we mix up magnani- mous conduct with unmagnanimous conduct and let the gentlemen of the world choose them they do not know which is which. So, the reason that I say the gentlemen of the world do not know magnanimity does not lie in the matter of definition either; it also lies in the process of selection" (今天下之君子之名仁也, 雖禹湯無以易之. 兼仁與不仁, 而使天下之君子取焉, 不能知也. 故我曰: 天下之君子不知仁者, 非以其名也, 亦以其取也).

10 See *Xunzi* (荀子), chapter 2 "Cultivating Oneself" (修身): "Through avoidance of prejudice and through *yi* the gentleman overcomes capricious personal desires" (君子之能以公義勝私

distinguishes between the domains of the "public" and "private,"[11] he does not accept Mozi's claim that "universal love" forms the explanation for the "public." Rather, he regards Mozi's thoughts as being personal and "private worries" (私憂)[12] which do not comprehend the principles of society. According to Xunzi, a country or society is a complex system compromising the accumulation of human experiences over long periods of time. Contrary to Mozi, it is not easily or merely governable via the formula of "universal love and mutual benefit" (兼相愛, 交相利). Thus, Xunzi proposes that the only person who can overcome or go beyond his personal benefit, and act in accordance with the public morality, is the Confucian gentleman who has thoroughly contemplated the areas of human culture and morality. The representative proponent of Legalism, Han Feizi, also considers this issue of the public and private. Yet he does not accept the concept of "public morality"—instead elaborating the distinction between the public and private via more theoretical explanations.[13] However, he

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欲). Hutton (2014), p.15. Eric L. Hutton's translation is used for the *Xunzi* text.

11 See *Xunzi*, chapter 12 "The Way to Be a Lord" (君道): "Exalt ritual, set out proper models, then in the state there will be constancy. Honor the worthy, employ those able, commoners then will be pointed rightly .... Make clear people's allotments, their responsibilities, assign to people proper works, arrange activities, use those having talents, grant office or abilities, so none are not well ordered, nor have improprieties. Then unprejudiced ways will enjoy success, and selfish approaches make no progress, unprejudiced yi will shine bright and clear, and selfish pursuits wholly disappear" (隆禮至法則國有常, 尚賢使能則民知方 ... 然後明分職, 序事業, 材技官能, 莫不治理, 則公道達而私門塞矣, 公義明而私事息矣). Hutton (2014), pp.124-5.

12 See *Xunzi*, chapter 10 "Enriching the State" (富國): "In his teachings, Mozi worries very conspicuously about insufficiency for the whole world. However, insufficiency is not the common disaster facing the world. That is only Mozi's individual worry and erroneous reckoning" (墨子之言昭昭然為天下憂不足. 夫不足非天下之公患也, 特墨子之私憂過計也.). Hutton (2014), p.88.

13 See *Han Feizi* (韓非子), chapter 49 "The Five Vermin" (五蠹): "In ancient times when Ts'ang Chieh created the system of writing, he used the character for "private" to express the idea of self-centeredness, and combined the elements for "private" and "opposed to" to form the character for "public" " (古者蒼頡之作書也, 自環者謂之私, 背私謂之公, 公私之相背也). Watson (1964), p.106. Burton Watson's translation is used here, but Watson's translation doesn't include the complete works of *Han Feizi* and so I will indicate other translator's name when needed. Also, see *Han Feizi*, chapter 19 "Admonishing the Crooked" (飾邪): "It is the duty of the sovereign to make clear the distinction between public and private interests, enact laws and statutes openly, and forbid private favors. Indeed, to enforce whatever is ordered and stop whatever is prohibited, is the public justice of the lord of men. To practise personal faith to friends, and not to be encouraged by any reward nor to be discouraged by any punishment, is the private righteousness of ministers .... That public and private interests must be clearly distinguished and laws and prohibitions must be carefully enacted, the early kings already understood" (禁主之道, 必明於公私之分, 明法制, 去私恩. 夫令

does not accept Xunzi's Confucian explanation of the "public." Instead, Han Feizi stipulates that "private" is a concept opposed to "law,"[14] and re-describes Confucian political theory (which is in opposition to that of Legalism) as a kind of "moral governance" (心治)[15] — thus relegating it as part of the "private." Summing up, there is no thorough discussion of the issue of the "public" and "private" within the *Analects* and *Mencius*. The progenitor of this issue in the pre-Qin period is Mozi, who proposes the concept of "public morality." While Xunzi attempts to use the concept of "public morality" to re-conceptualize Confucian political theory, he runs into harsh criticisms by Han Feizi.

Despite the fact that Confucianism is often regarded as having the strongest social consciousness and practicality compared to the other schools of thought, it was often the target of criticisms concerning the issue of publicity due to problems internal to its theories. Since the time of Confucius, the first principle of Confucianism regards "family relations" (親親)[16] as being the fundamentals of moral norms, and sees social ethics as an extension of familial ethics.[17] However, problems emerge when family ethics comes into conflict with societal ethics. The discussions in the *Analects* (Zilu chapter), concerning the issue of "straight-forwardness"

必行, 禁必止, 人主之公義也; 必行其私, 信於朋友, 不可為賞勸, 不可為罰沮, 人臣之私義也 .... 公私不可不明, 法禁不可不審, 先王知之矣). Liao's translation (1959) is used for this chapter.

14 See *Han Feizi*, chapter 45 "Conflicts with the Subjects" (詭使): "The cause of order is law, the cause of chaos is selfishness. Once law is enacted, no selfish act can be done. Hence the saying, "Whoever tolerates selfishness finds chaos, whoever upholds law finds order" " (所以治者法也, 所以亂者私也, 法立則莫得爲私矣, 故曰: 道私者亂, 道法者治). Liao (1959).

15 See *Han Feizi*, chapter 27 "Controlling People" (用人): "Casting law and tact aside and trusting to personal judgments, even Yao could not rectify a state" (釋法術而任心治, 堯不能正一國). Liao (1959), chapter 49 "The Five Vermin" (五蠹): "Men who quote the early kings and preach benevolence and righteousness, fill up the court, wherefore the government cannot be freed from disorder" (舉先王言仁義者盈廷, 而政不免於亂). See Liao (1959)

16 All branches of Confucianism regard "family relations" as the first principle. See *Mencius*, 6B3: "Filial affection for parents is the working of benevolence. Respect for elders is the working of righteousness. There is no other reason for those feelings - they belong to all under heaven" (親親, 仁也; 敬長, 義也. 無他, 達之天下也). Note that "親親" is here translated as "filial affection" rather than "family relations." Also, see *Xunzi*, chapter 19 "Discourse on Ritual" (禮論): "And so, the former kings accordingly established a proper form for the situation, and thereby what is *yi* in venerating those who are esteemed and loving those who are intimate was set" (先王案為之立文, 尊尊親親之義至矣). Hutton (2014), p.216.

17 One of the classic examples is found in *Da Xue*, concerning the ethical model that in order to bring peace to the world, one must begin by engaging in self-cultivation, then regulate one's family, and then govern the state well.

(直),[18] constitute the beginnings of the discussions of "public" and "private," and reveals how Confucianism lags behind the other schools of thought during that period. If a son reports his father for stealing a sheep, he is acting against human nature; however, we cannot seriously accept Confucius" response that "the father conceals the misconduct of the son, and the son conceals the misconduct of the father." Even though some successive rationalizations were proffered in defense of such a response[19] (which otherwise is difficult to establish as the basis of public morality), the Confucians continued to regard it as their highest principle[20] — a stance which came under severe criticisms from the Mohists and other schools of thought.[21] This is because if we regard familial concealment as the basis of morality, then we cannot avoid the implication of being unfair to others.[22]

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18 See *Analects* 13.18: "The Duke of She informed Confucius, saying, "Among us here there are those who may be styled upright in their conduct. If their father have stolen a sheep, they will bear witness to the fact." Confucius said, "Among us, in our part of the country, those who are upright are different from this. The father conceals the misconduct of the son, and the son conceals the misconduct of the father. Uprightness is to be found in this" " (葉公語孔子曰: "吾黨有直躬者, 其父攘羊, 而子證之." 孔子曰: "吾黨之直者異於是, 父爲子隱, 子爲父隱. 直在其中矣").

19 See *Xunzi*, chapter 29 "The Way to Be a Son" (子道): "A father who has a contentious son will not act in ways that lack ritual propriety" (父有爭子, 不行無禮). See Hutton (2014), p.326; *Li Ji* (禮記, The Book of Ritual), chapter 12 "The Patterns of Family" (內則): "If a parent have a fault, (the son) should with bated breath, and bland aspect, and gentle voice, admonish him. If the admonition do not take effect, he will be the more reverential and the more filial; and when the father seems pleased, he will repeat the admonition .... If the parent be angry and (more) displeased, and beat him till the blood flows, he should not presume to be angry and resentful, but be (still) more reverential and more filial" (父母有過, 下氣怡色, 柔聲以諫. 諫若不入, 起敬起孝, 說則復諫 ... 父母怒, 不說而撻之流血, 不敢疾怨, 起敬起孝). Translated by James Legge ; *The Classic of Filial Piety* (孝經), chapter 15 "Dissuasion" (諫諍): "And the father who had a son that would remonstrate with him would not sink into the gulf of unrighteous deeds" (父有爭子, 則身不陷於不義). Translated by James Legge.

20 Refer to Zhu Xi's commentary on the above citation: "父子相隱, 天理人情之至也, 故不求為直, 而直在其中."

21 The criticisms of this Confucian position was not peculiar to Mozi; instead, they constituted a point of commonality between practically every other school of thought except Confucianism. Even so, Mozi's criticisms are the most direct and severe. See *Mozi,* chapter 39 "Against Confucians" (非儒下): "The Confucianist says: Love among relations should depend upon the degree of relationship, and honour to the virtuous should be graded. This is to advocate a discrimination among the near and the distant relations and among the respectable and the humble .... Yet the Confucianist pretends it to be for the sake of the parents. This is partiality to the most favourite but neglect of the most important. Isn't this great perversity?" (儒者曰: 親親有術, 尊賢有等, 言親疏尊卑之異也 .... 有曰: 所以重親也, 爲欲厚所至私, 輕所至重, 豈非大奸也哉!)

22 There has been debate within academic communities, over whether the concealment

Despite this, Mencius nevertheless insists on the principle of "family relations." Of course, when someone asked Mencius what a ruler should do if his own father committed murder, Mencius gave a seemingly self-contradictory response. The law-enforcement carries out their duties, but the ruler secretly leaves the state together with his father.[23] Mencius does not propose that family relations can trump public rules or laws, but nevertheless maintains that the former is the supreme principle.

The fundamental reason for Confucian's defenses of "family relations" lies in their regarding morality and norms as originating from interpersonal relationships, rather than given by an absolutely existing Heaven. No one can exit from the fundamental relationships that are family relations — the latter forming the basis of morality and the cultivation of moral sentiments. Opposed to this Confucian position, Mozi instead chooses the idea of "Heaven's will" (天志) as the first principle.[24] From Mozi's perspective, morality and norms should be regarded as being given by Heaven. This is because no one can fully leave his selfish perspective and thus does not ever compare up to Heaven's "will" (意志) of "universal love and mutual benefit."[25] According to Mozi, if we rely on human strength (or capacities), we will never realize the ideal of universal love without distinctions (or regardless of social distinctions). Also precisely

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concerns only father-son relationships, or extends more generally to familial relationships. See Guo (2004).

23 See *Mencius*, 7A35: "Tao Ying asked, saying, "Shun being sovereign, and Gao Yao chief minister of justice, if Gu Sou had murdered a man, what would have been done in the case?" Mencius said, "Gao Yao would simply have apprehended him." "But would not Shun have forbidden such a thing?" "Indeed, how could Shun have forbidden it? Gao Yao had received the law from a proper source." "In that case what would Shun have done?" Shun would have regarded abandoning the kingdom as throwing away a worn-out sandal. He would privately have taken his father on his back, and retired into concealment, living somewhere along the sea-coast. There he would have been all his life, cheerful and happy, forgetting the kingdom" (桃應問曰: 舜為天子, 皐陶為士, 瞽瞍殺人, 則如之何? 孟子曰: 執之而已矣. 然則舜不禁與? 曰: 夫舜惡得而禁之? 夫有所受之也. 然則舜如之何? 曰: 舜視棄天下猶棄敝蹝也. 竊負而逃, 遵海濱而處, 終身訢然, 樂而忘天下).

24 See *Mozi*, chapter 26 "Heaven's Will" (天志上): "He who obeys the will of Heaven, loving universally and benefiting others, will obtain rewards. He who opposes the will of Heaven, by being partial and unfriendly and harming others, will incur punishment" (順天意者, 兼相愛, 交相利, 必得賞. 反天意者, 別相惡, 交相賊, 必得罰).

25 See *Mozi*, chapter 44 "Major Illustrations" (大取): "Heaven's love of man is more all-encompassing than the sage's love of man; its benefitting man is more profound than the sage's benefitting man" (天之愛人也, 薄于聖人之愛人也. 其利人也, 厚于聖人之利人也). Johnston (2010), p.579.

because of this, Mozi's explanation of "Heavenly Will" as the source of publicity is impoverished in terms of considerations concerning interpersonal sentiments. Xunzi entirely rejects Mozi's view that Heaven has will, and establishes the theory of the distinction between Heaven and human beings (天人相分).[26] He also refutes the Mohist idea of universal love without distinctions, and defends the Confucian affirmation of a hierarchical system.[27] Although Mencius and Xunzi adopts differing positions concerning human nature, and the relationship between Heaven and human beings, they both do not discard the principle of "family relations." And from the fact that both thinkers derive ethical criteria from interpersonal relationships, we can see them as holding on to the same starting position.

Confucian thinkers since the Tang and Song dynasties have consistently tried to preserve the idea of publicity using Confucian theory. Hanyu (韓愈), a Tang dynasty scholar, uses the distinction between "public" and "private" to distinguish Confucianism from other schools of thought. He deems that unlike how Daoism or Buddhism only differ in their focus and resolution of personal problems, Confucianism is the only way through which we can broadly (or prevalently) realize benevolence and righteousness (義) in society.[28] From the Song dynasty, Confucian scholars not only inherited Confucianism's way of distinguishing itself from other schools of thought on the basis of the distinction between "public" and "private," but also employed the opposition between Heavenly principles and human desires (人欲) and the distinction between the gentleman (君子) and the petty man (小人), in order to explain the problem of "public" and "private."[29] This way of understanding the "public and private" has been

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26 See *Xunzi*, chapter 17 "Discourse on Heaven" (天論): "There is a constancy to the activities of Heaven. They do not persist because of Yao. They do not perish because of Jie .... And so, one who understands clearly the respective allotments of Heaven and humankind can be called a person of utmost achievement" (天行有常, 不爲堯存, 不爲桀亡 ... 故明於天人之分, 則可謂至人矣). Hutton (2014), p.175.

27 See Xunzi, chapter 20 "Discourse on Ritual" (禮論): "What is meant by "differentiations"? I say: It is for noble and lowly to have their proper ranking, for elder and youth to have their proper distance, and for poor and rich, humble and eminent each to have their proper weights" (曷謂別? 曰: 貴賤有等, 長幼有差, 貧富輕重皆有稱者也). Hutton (2014), p.201.

28 See Han Yu's "The Origin of Dao" (原道): "博愛之謂仁, 行而宜之之謂義 ... 合仁與義言之也, 天下之公言也. 老子之所謂道德云者, 去仁與義言之也, 一人之私言也."

29 See *Zhuziyulei* (朱子語類), Book 124: "釋氏與吾儒所見亦同, 只是義利, 公私之間不同, 此說不然"; Book 117: "今且要看天理人欲, 義利, 公私, 分別得明."; Book 8: "凡天理, 人欲, 義利, 公私, 善惡

crucial within Confucian discourse since the pre-Qin period. Yet if the question is pressed, concerning what criteria there is to distinguish between public morality and private desires (私欲), the Confucian answer is merely whether it is in accordance with Heavenly principles. If we press further for clarification on what behavior is in accordance with Heavenly principles, the Confucian response would either be in terms of benevolence,[30] or filial piety.[31] And finally, the questioning ends with a recourse to the negotiations between "family relations" or "public morality" — an age-old question.

Donghak on Self-Awareness and the Relationship between Heaven and Human Beings

Donghak originates from the enlightenment experience of Choe Je-u (aka. Suun, subsequently referred to as Suun) in April 1860. As a knowledgeable scholar, he did not entirely reject the Confucian tradition,[32] but he realized that the traditional ideology was no longer able to fulfil the needs of the current times.[33] The rampant diseases proliferating in Korean society during that time, together with the influence of other countries, led to an increasing overall crisis. The rapid expansion of the powers of the

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之辨, 莫不皆通"; Book 43: "大抵君子小人, 只在公私之間." Wang Yang Ming also discusses the issues of publicity and privacy, and that of heavenly principles and human desires in a connected manner. See *Chuanxilu* (傳習錄), the 2nd Clause: "盡夫天理之極, 而無一毫人欲之私," the 3rd Clause: "心卽理也, 此心無私欲之蔽, 卽是天理."

30 See *Zhuziyulei*, Book 6: "仁是天理之統體," "做到私欲淨盡, 天理流行, 便是仁," "仁是天理, 公是天理."

31 See *Chuanxilu*, the 5th Clause: "愛曰: "如今人儘有知得父當孝, 兄當弟者, 卻不能孝, 不能弟. 便是知與行分明是兩件." 先生曰: "此已被私欲隔斷, 不是知行的本體了. 盡夫天理之極, 而無一毫人欲之私"."

32 See *Eastern Great Scripture* (東經大全, hereafter abbr. DGDJ), "On Cultivating Virtue" (修德文): "Humaneness, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are the virtues taught by the former sages. Keeping a good mind and having the right spiritual force are the virtues established only by me" (仁義禮智, 先聖之所敎; 修心正氣, 惟我之更定). Kim and Yoon (2007), p.18.

33 According to the song lyrics records in *Memorial Songs of Yongdam* (龍潭遺詞, hereafter abbr. YDYS), "Song of Instruction" (敎訓歌), Choe Je-u thought that the time of Confucianism and Buddhism, which had been sustained and passed on for the past centuries, was coming to an end.

Western Learning (in this case, Catholicism),[34] and the corresponding rapidity of Koreans forsaking their traditional values and embracing Catholicism, led Suun to have no choice but to undertake a deeper reflection of the reality of Korean society then. Although he acknowledged the strengths of Western civilization, and even admitted that it could be the universal value of the new age,[35] he was reluctant to believe the concept of "Heaven" that was propounded by Western Learning. From Suun's perspective, the fact that Catholics believed — as if they saw it with their own eyes — the claim that "God" actually existed in Heaven or paradise, in the Jade Capital (玉京臺), was absurd and empty of meaning.[36] What was even harder to accept was that upon establishing the church, Koreans forsook traditional values such as ritual practices and the Five Cardinal Relationships. They went to the churches to pray for their own afterlives, denied the existence of their deceased parents" spirits (父母神靈), and recklessly abandoned ancestor worship.[37] By then, Suun had already recognized that the reform of traditional society was inevitable, and was constantly worried about a harsh world in which each person was selfish and followed his or her own

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34 The rise in power of Catholicism was a cause of worry for the Korean government. The Korean government regarded that as a phenomenon that could shake the foundations of their society, and from the late 18th century, began the repression of Catholics. The earliest recorded repression in Korean history was the Sin-hae Persecution〔辛亥迫害, Jeongjo (正祖)15, 1791〕in the year 1791. The situation became more dire subsequently, due to the combination of various factors such as the repression of Catholics, the struggle for power between different factions, and the reaction against Western intervention in Korean. Consequently, the more incidents of the severe repression of Catholics successively occurred — such as "Eul-myo Persecution (乙卯迫害, Jeongjo 19, 1795)," "Sin-yu Persecution〔辛酉迫害, Sunjo (純祖) 1, 1801〕," "Gi-hae Persecution〔己亥迫害, Heonjong (憲宗) 5, 1839〕," "Byeong-o Persecution (丙午迫害, Heonjong 12, 1846)," "Gyeong-sin Persecution〔庚申迫害, Cheoljong (哲宗) 11, 1860〕," "Byeong-in Persecution〔丙寅迫害, Gojong (高宗) 3, 1866〕."

35 See "Discussion on Learning" (論學文) in DGDJ: "In April 1860 the country was in chaos, and the minds of the people were confused, and no direction or solution was known. Strange rumors were rampant in the country: the Westerners have realized Truth and Virtue, and through their inventions they can accomplish anything, and if they attack with their weapons, no one can withstand them. If China is destroyed, wouldn't Korea face the same fate? Is the reason for their success none other than the way that they call the Western way: the learning that they call Catholicism and the religion that they call holy religion? Do they know perhaps the time of Heaven and did they receive the mandate of Heaven?" (夫庚申之年, 建巳之月, 天下紛亂, 民心淆薄, 莫知所向之地, 又有怪違之說, 崩騰又世間. 西洋之人, 道成立德, 及其造化, 無事不成, 功闘干戈, 無人在前, 中國燒滅, 豈可無脣亡之患也? 都緣無他, 斯人, 道稱西道, 學稱天主, 教則聖教, 此非知天時而受天命耶?) Kim & Yoon (2007), p.8.

36 See "Song of Way and Virtue" (道德歌) in YDYS.

37 See "Song of Encouraging to Learn" (勸學歌) in YDYS.

mind (各自為心).[38] Even so, he was unable to unquestioningly accept (as others did) the removal of the idea of Heaven from the realm of human experience, and isolated within a metaphysical domain within Western Learning.

Suun's enlightenment was the result of such exploration within darkness. His idea of "reverently bearing Hanullim within one's own"[39] was a great revision to the understanding of the relationship between Heaven and human beings. The "God" in Donghak is neither a supreme being who exists in a faraway metaphysical realm to supervise and control human beings, nor a principle (道理) which supports and protects the existing order of society. Within Donghak, what is regarded as absolute existence is "ultimate energy" or *jigi* (至氣) — the inner spirituality which all individuals have, to bear Hanullim within one's own. This was a subjectivity that could be realized, felt, and genuinely experienced.[40]

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38 See "On Propagating Truth" (布德文) in DGDJ: "However, in current times the people of the world have selfish minds, and do not follow the Principle of Heaven nor care for the Will of Heaven. Therefore, my mind is always anxious and fearful, and I don't know what will happen in the future" (又此挽近以來, 一世之人, 各自爲心, 不順天理, 不顧天命, 心常悚然, 莫知所向矣). Kim and Yoon (2007), p.4.

39 My view is that the term "Cheonju" (天主) here refers to "한울님/하늘님," and is the translation of the Korean term for absolute existence. The Donghak scripture was written in both vernacular Korean and classical Chinese, the former to meet the needs of the populace and the latter of the intellectuals. From the perspective of the official publication by Choe Si-hyeong (1827-1898), the classical Chinese scripture (DGDJ, 1880) was published earlier than the vernacular Korean scripture (YDYS, 1881). However, according to the early Donghak historical record (道源記書), Suun first composed the Korean lyrics for "Song of Yongdam" (龍潭歌), "Song of the Reclusive" (處士歌), "Song of Instruction" (教訓歌), "Song of Reassurance" (安心歌) of YDYS in spring 1860, one year before completing the various Chinese scriptures such "On Propagating Truth" (布德文) of DGDJ in spring 1861. In YDYS, ultimate reality was designated as "ᄒᆞ늘님" (Classical Korean) / "하날님" (Modern Korean)," which was the Koreans" own term used to refer to ultimate reality. It is controversial how to explain the concept of "Cheonju" (天主) in Donghak and other religions in Korea. Don Baker analyses the four main terms which modern Koreans used to refer to ultimate reality (the original Romanization kept intact): 하나님, Hananim (One God Above), 하느님 Hanŭnim (the sky-god), 한울님 Hanullim (*Chŏndo- kyo's* own term for God), and 한얼님 Hanŏlim (*Taejong-gyo's* own term for God). See Baker (2002).

40 The Donghak incantations express such a unique conception of the relationship between Heaven and man. Refer to the 13-syllable incantation, "Si-Cheon-Ju / Jo-Hwa-Jeong / Yeong-Se-Bul-Mang / Man-Sa-Ji" (侍天主 造化定 永世不忘 萬事知) and the 21-syllable incantation, "Ji-Gi-Geum-Ji / Won-Wi-Dae-Gang / Si-Cheon-Ju / Jo-Hwa-Jeong / Yeong-Se-Bul-Mang / Man-Sa-Ji" (至氣今至 願為大綱 侍天主 造化定 永世不忘 萬事知). Baker translates the 21-syllable as follows: "Ultimate Energy being all around me, I pray that I feel that Energy within me here and now. Recognizing that God is within me, I will be

Within Suun's mystical experience, the absolute existence told him that "my heart/mind is nothing but your heart/mind" (吾心卽汝心)[41] and at that point, there was no more separation between Suun and the absolute existence which was termed *sangje* (上帝) by people during that time. This is Donghak's unique understanding of the relationship between Heaven and human beings, as well as the first step to the advanced understanding of self-dignity. Recalling the earlier discussion about the disputes between Confucians and Mohists concerning whether Heaven or human beings were the basis for publicity, it is easy to see how Donghak's understanding of Heaven differs. For Mozi, Heavenly Will does not account for personal cons- ciousness or awareness — everyone just has to act in accordance with it. In contrast, Donghak's conception of Heaven resides within every individual. For Confucianism, Heavenly principles is a universal value established upon the fundamentals of inter-personal relationships and sentiments. In contrast to that, Donghak's understanding of Heaven is embodied in terms of *jigi*. Because it concerns energy or *gi* (氣), Heaven is not a metaphysical principle. Rather, it is a living God of personal experience — this is the foundation of people's self-awakening and development of their own ideas. The experience of God as described by Donghak is "the state of both internally bearing the Divine spirituality and externally being aware of connecting energy" (內有神靈, 外有氣化),[42] which is that the self-awareness of one's spirituality from within oneself, is concurrent with the real experience of sensing the existence of other

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transformed. Constantly aware of that divine presence within, I will become attuned to all that is going on around me." See Baker (2007), p.450.

41 See DGDJ, "Discussion on Learning" (論學文): "Suddenly my body shook, I felt a chill and I felt the vital force of contact with the Spirit, and inwardly I heard divine words of instruction. I looked around but could not see anyone. I listened but could not hear anything. Therefore, I felt it very strange. After bracing my mind and renewing my energy, I asked, "Why is it like this?" The divine answer was, "My mind is your mind. How can humankind know it? People know of Heaven and earth, but they do not know the Spirit. I am the Spirit. As I am giving you the eternal Truth, cultivate and refine it, write it down and teach it to the people. Establish the laws of practice and propagating the Truth (virtue). Then you will have eternal life and will brighten the world" " (身多戰寒, 外有接靈之氣, 內有降話之敎, 視之不見, 聽之不聞, 心尙怪訝, 修心正氣而問曰: 何爲若然也? 曰: 吾心卽汝心也. 人何知之? 知天地而無知鬼神, 鬼神者吾也. 及汝無窮無窮之道, 修而煉之, 制其文敎人, 正其法布德則, 令汝長生, 昭然于天下矣). Kim and Yoon (2007), pp.8-9.

42 *Ibid.*, "*Si* means having the Divine Spirit within and expressing the vital force in life. When people realize this they will keep it in their hearts without change" (侍者, 內有神靈, 外有氣化, 一世之人, 各知不移者也). Kim and Yoon (2007), p.11.

individuals (beyond oneself) bearing Hannulim.

The Donghak view of Heaven and human beings was not completed during Suun's time, but extended, supplemented and enhanced by the subsequent leader Choe Si-hyeong (aka. Haewol), and the next leader Son Byeong-hui (aka. Uiam, 1861-1922).[43] Haewol was committed to enabling people to become self-aware, and to cultivate themselves. On one front, he used the idea of "human being is the same as Heaven"[44] to reiterate the principle of continuity between Heaven and human beings. On the other front, he used the ideas of "treat human beings as though dealing with Heaven" (事人如天)[45] and "Heaven and Earth are our parents" (天地父母)[46] in order to extend the boundaries of God to encompass the existence of all members of society and the natural environment. Uiam lived in a time with urgent demands arising from modernization, and placed even more emphasis on the strength of one's own self. Concurrent with his reiteration of the idea of "human being is nothing but Heaven" (人乃天), [47] he took the further step of changing the term "human being" (人) to "myself" (我) in order to articulate the idea that "I am Heaven; Heaven is myself."[48] As Uiam told his Donghak disciples, everyone should not rely on "customary Heaven" (習慣天), but should realize that "I myself am originally Hanullim" (自我本來天主).[49] This requirement demonstrates that he regards every individual as active subjects possessing the capacity for self-discovery.

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43 Some scholars argue that the transition from Suun's "Bearing Heaven" (Si-Cheon, 侍天) to Haewol's "Cultivating Heaven" (Yang-Cheon, 養天) and subsequently to Uiam's "Embodying Heaven" (Che-Cheon, 體天) consists of a spiritual revolution or reform. See Yun 1974. As for the transition of "Cheon" among Donghak leaders, see Choe Si-hyeong, *Sermons by Divine Teacher Haewol* (海月神師法說, hereafter abbr. HSB), Section 25 "Cultivating Hanullim" (養天主) and also Son Byeong-hui, *Sermons by Holy Teacher Uiam* (義庵聖師法說, hereafter abbr. USB), Section 11 "Discourse on Three Battles" (三戰論).

44 See HSB, Section 4 "Heaven, Earth and Human / Ghost and Spirit/ Yin and Yang" (天地人·鬼神·陰陽).

45 See HSB, Section 7 "On Treating People and Meeting Things" (待人接物).

46 See HSB, Section 2 "Heaven and Earth Are Parents" (天地父母).

47 See USB, Section 8 "Great and Upright Doctrine" (大宗正義).

48 See USB, Section 16 "Training for the Way" (修道法): "我是天, 天是我也. 我與天都是一體也, 然而氣不正而心有移故, 違其命; 氣有正而心有定故, 合其德. 道之成不成, 都在於氣心之正如何矣."

49 See USB, Section 26 "Unification of Faith and Consistency of Norms" (信仰統一與規模一致).

Donghak's Transformation and Experimentation of the Confucian Concept of Publicity

Regarding human beings as subjects who have the capacity for self-transformation and the potential to create history, Donghak thought achieved a breakthrough in the limitations of various traditional systems of thought. While Donghak also discusses filial piety, it does not regard it as constituting a first principle together with "family relations"; instead, it is in relation to the infinite continuity of life. Without our parents, we would not exist; similarly, it is only given my existence that there can be descendants. However, the continuity of life is not restricted to the inheritance between human beings, nor is filial piety a feature exclusive to human beings.[50] Consequently, from the perspective of Donghak, both family ethics and social ethics are the result of our consciousness and realization of the idea that "human being is the same as Heaven" — they are not our blind adherence to the existing ethical norms. Regarding Hanullim as a responsive reality (感應) which is "absolutely impartial and does not choose between good and evil" (至公無私, 不擇善惡)[51] reveals a unique transformation that Donghak brings to the idea of publicity. Specifically, it operates in accordance with the principle or rationale of the creation and inter-connectedness of Heaven and Earth, in order to maintain the equal worth or value of the self — but without being constrained by so-called notions of good and evil or already-existing

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50 See DGDJ, "Not So, Yet So" (不然其然): "When I think of my present existence, I am aware that my parents preceded me, and when I think of my future, I am aware that my descendants will carry on through successive generations. When I think of my future, its principle does not differ from my thought about my present existence. However, when I consider past generations, questions arise in my mind, and I find it difficult to understand how the first parent of humankind became a human being .... In this world, no one could exist without parents. Therefore, when we consider the ancestors of each person, we can say that all exist because of self evident relations .... The cows that listen to their masters" words and cultivate the farms seem to have minds and knowledge. These cows have the strength to work and live by themselves. Then, why do they suffer and die for men? There is a saying that crows bring food to their old mothers. Do they know filial piety and love? Swallows know their masters. No matter how poor their maters may be, they return to their home every year" (我思我則, 父母在玆, 後思後則, 子孫存彼. 來世而比之則理無異於我思我, 去世而尋之則或難分於人爲人 ... 世間, 孰能無父母之人? 考其先則, 其然其然于其然之故也 ... 耕牛之聞言兮! 如有心如有知, 以力之足爲兮? 何以苦何以死? 烏子之反哺兮! 彼亦知夫孝悌? 玄鳥之知主兮! 貧亦歸貧亦歸). Kim and Yoon (2007), pp.21-3.

51 See "Song of Way and Virtue" in YDYS.

ethical frameworks — such that it responds to the idea of publicity which is re-configured by changing times.

This is not to theorize for the sake of theorizing; rather, it is thought which accompanies practice and actions. After his enlightenment, Suun married two of his female servants to his sons, and before his death imparted the leadership of the religion to Haewol (who had a low social status and was not learned). A more important reality is that despite the fact that there were many Donghak disciples who were both learned and had high social statuses, they did not oppose Suun's decision, but instead followed and relied on Haewol for more than thirty years. In view of the discrimination (based on social status) prevalent in Korean society then, this is an almost unimaginable phenomenon. Judging from this, the community or solidarity of Donghak had overcome the social hierarchies of Korean society then, gradually moving towards a more public model. The Donghak community always preserved the tradition of "mutual aid" (有無相資)[52] — where people helped each other mutually regardless of their wealth. This demonstrates that the Donghak community had surmounted the conflict between family and social ethics. Moreover, Haewol also changed the practice of worship from "facing the wall" (向壁設位) to "facing oneself" (向我設位).[53] From the perspective of a Confucian, this was a shocking travesty or blasphemy. But from the perspective of Donghak, this is actually the true way of honoring one's parents — it regards my parents as a life-force living together with me, rather than simply being deceased and residing in the underworld. Thus, "facing myself" does not abandon ancestor worship in the way that Western Learning does. Rather, it transforms the notion of worship from one in which we only worship and commemorate our ancestors annually during their death anniversary, to a sacred ritual in which they are always present within our lives. From Haewol's perspective, the correct way to worship Heaven and

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52 The earliest record of this expression appears in 1863, in the notices (通文) circulated by Confucian scholars in the Southeast Korea (慶尚道) to reject Donghak. More interestingly, from the perspective of Joseon Korean (朝鮮) Confucians, Donghak was merely a cult which confused and muddied good and evil. Yet from here we can see that during that time, Donghak did not discriminate between persons of different social status, nor made distinctions between men and women – instead, it was an idealistic community which treated its members equally, as though they were of the same flesh and blood.

53 See HSB, Section 19 "Worship of Facing Myself" (向我設位): "神師問曰: "奉祀之時, 向壁設位可乎? 向我設位可乎?" 孫秉熙答曰: "向我設位可也." 神師曰: "然矣. 自此以後, 向我設位可也"."

one's ancestors was to never forget them even in each and every action, every day. He further extended the scope of morality to the existence of non-humans, and proposed the doctrine of "using Heaven to eat Heaven" (以天食天)[54] — to regard our everyday meals as an exchange of life between we who are bearing Hanullim, and the myriad life-forms who are also bearing Hanullim. In this way, the ethical model of Donghak requires a total "transformation" of our modes of thinking, and is neither constrained by the Xunzian "accumulation" of ritual practices within society nor by the Mencian "expansion" of human nature.

Conclusion

The Donghak experimentation of publicity is an unfinished issue. Even though it achieved epoch-making success temporarily, the various difficulties Donghak faced throughout the historical transitions led to it not taking roots in modern Korean society today.[55] The Donghak during the Japanese Occupation, together with the various experiences of struggling for sovereignty under colonial rule, moved towards the status of a modernized religion under the banner of Cheondogyo (Religion of Heavenly Way). After independence and the separation of the country into North and South Koreas, Donghak and Cheondoism lost their intellectual vigor, and were relegated as specimens of traditional thought. Donghak lost the opportunity to reform traditional morality represented by Confucianism, as well as to establish a new ideal of publicity. Despite that, Donghak remains an indispensable part of discussions on publicity in the East-Asian world, as well as still being an intellectual source awaiting new interpretations and practice. In Korea, the religious, social, and recently the life movements have all drawn from the historical experiences of Donghak in one way or another.

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54 See HSB, Section 8 "The Talisman and Incantation" (靈符呪文): "以心治心, 以氣治氣, 以氣食氣, 以天食天, 以天奉天," "吾道義以天食天, 以天化天, 萬物生生稟此心此氣以後, 得其生成, 宇宙萬物總貫一氣一心也" and also Section 24 "Using Heaven to Eat Heaven" (以天食天).

55 See Park (2010).

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